

A Disussion: The Uses of History on Fiction

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*The Uses of History in Fiction**

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William Styron

Robert Penn Warren

C. Vann Woodward, moderator

* The exchange that follows is edited from the transcription of a panel discussion at the thirty-fourth annual meeting of the Southern Historical Association in New Orleans, Louisiana, at the Jung Hotel, November 6, 1968.

WOODWARD

In introducing novelists into the formal deliberations of historians, I really feel no need to apologize, except perhaps to the novelists. For if apologies are due, they should come, I think, from the side of the historian. Historians have too long cultivated a rather priggish, Nineteenth-Century cult of fact, a creed that borrowed its tenets and prestige from the sciences and the heyday of their ascendancy. Like scientists, we said, historians stuck to facts, preferably to hard facts. This conception, this prestige of hard facts, derives especially from the English. It was Oscar Wilde who said that the English are always degrading Truth into Fact, and he went on to say that when a Truth becomes a Fact, it loses all its intellectual value.

Since fiction was conceived to be, in this usage, the opposite of fact, and since novelists dealt exclusively in fiction, historians were inclined to be rather priggish about novelists, especially if they ventured into historical subjects. Historians have been much more eager to claim kinship with scientists, notably social scientists. When the social sciences turn to historical subjects, historians appear flattered rather than offended. We were, or have been, inclined to embrace them as cousins, to offer joint courses, to hold conferences. Our kinship is actually much closer to novelists. We are in fact siblings, historical siblings. The novel is the youngest of the literary forms—the only one the Greeks didn't invent. It was born only in the mid-Eighteenth Century, not long before professional historiography first saw the light of day in Germany. Both sprang from a common parentage of story tellers. Both grew up together in an environment permeated with the growing historical consciousness of western man, and competed with each other to satisfy the demand for historical understanding.

In their mutual attitudes there has been a good deal of sibling rivalry—though, it is, I think, more manifest in the historians than in the novelists. Actually, I find among novelists more respect for and awareness of good history than I find among historians a proper respect for and awareness of good novels. Over the last two centuries novels have become increasingly saturated with history, and novelists have been becoming ever more deeply historically conscious.

In a sense, all novels are historical novels. They all seek to understand, to describe, to recapture the past, however remote, however recent. They might all be described by the title of Marcel Proust's great work, *Remembrance of Things Past*. In his own efforts to understand, describe, and recapture the past, the novelist uses no more specialized a vocabulary than the

historian. As Isaiah Berlin has said, history employs few if any concepts or categories peculiar to itself, but broadly speaking, only those of common sense, or ordinary speech—in other words, the same speech the historian himself uses. If the historian feels free to borrow concepts and insights from the psychologist, the analyst, the sociologist, in his efforts to explain human motivation and behavior, the novelist is equally free to use the same resources in doing much the same thing.

An historian stands in no less need of imagination than the novelist; if anything he needs rather more. There are firm rules, of course, about what his discipline permits and forbids him to do with his imagination. He cannot, for example, as the novelist can, invent characters, invent motives for his characters. I certainly have no wish to relax those rules or to confuse or blur the distinction between the historian and the novelist. But over the years, as I have watched my novelist friends at their work, as I have read their books and talked with them about their problems, I have learned to appreciate more and more how much we have in common in our uses of the past, our interest in it, our demands upon it, our concerns with it.

This is, I think, especially true of Southern writers, and particularly of the three who take part in this discussion. Allen Tate has spoken of the peculiar historical consciousness of Southern writers, and described their work as a literature conscious of the past in the present. Tate could hardly have called to witness a better illustration of his thesis than his friend Robert Penn Warren. Warren's books have dealt with virtually every period of American history since the time of Thomas Jefferson, including that time and including also the period of Jackson, the Civil War, the early years of the 20th Century, the 1920's, the 1930's, and on down to the present. These books constitute for some of us a good part of our intellectual autobiography. His first book was not fiction at all, but a biography of John Brown. It seems to me that in that book of "straight" history, he announced the basic themes of all his novels: man's confrontation with evil, and the conflict between good and evil within the human heart. Together, these books constitute a moral history of the South.

William Styron's early novels dealt with contemporary themes and characters, though never without a characteristic consciousness of the past in the present. Only in this latest novel, on Nat Turner, has he turned to the more remote past for his subject, and in this "meditation on history," as he calls his book, he comes very close indeed, given the license of the novelist, to doing what the historian does in reconstructing the past.

Here he is concerned with the particular, rather than with the universal, which is, I believe, the distinction that Aristotle made between poetry and history.

Ralph Ellison has declared his allegiance to history, as well as his Southern identity, most clearly in his warning to a critic about the abstraction he would impose upon American reality. With characteristic Southern fear of abstraction, and abhorrence for it, he declared: "the Negro American consciousness is not a product (as so often seems true of so many other American groups) of a will to historical forgetfulness." Rather, it is the memory of slavery and the hope of emancipation, and the myths, both Southern and Northern.

I will call on these speakers in the order of seniority, and that will put Mr. Warren first.

WARREN

I want to say that I am appalled and honored to be invited to a group of historians. It makes you feel that the writing of fiction is more important than you thought it was, and that your writing is, too. I am honored to be here and it is a great pleasure to be among my friends—three old and dear friends.

What I want to do now is simply to try to state a few principles that occur to me about the relation between history and fiction—in a way, between history and art, as I see the problem, as a background to what may happen later.

First I should like to say that the word History is a very ambiguous word. Clearly it means on one hand things that happened in the past, the events of the past, the actions of the past. And the word also means the record of the past that historians write. So whenever the word is used, we have to sort out its meaning. I myself use it differently, in each sense, as the occasion may demand, and I'm afraid my friends do the same thing.

As Vann has said, history is in the past tense. That sounds simple enough. It is about the past. But it is not simple, because it is not merely about what happened in the past, it is also the imaginative past. History and fiction are both in this past tense. History is the literal past tense. The historian says, "It was in the past; I prove that it happened." The fiction writer says, "I'll take it as it has happened, if it happened at all—which it probably didn't." But the mode of the past tense is the past tense of a state of mind—the feel of the past, not the literal past itself. It is a mode of memories. It's the mind working in terms of memory. The history of the past that the historians write is the racial past, the national past, the sectional

past, all kinds of pasts, including economic history—but the past, always. To the novelist, say Thackeray, writing about Becky Sharp, the past may be merely a little personal past. But it is past. Even science fiction is about the past; the writers tell about the future as though it were past. In science fiction, you get yourself to a point beyond the story that you are telling. It is never in the future tense. It is in an assumed future which has become a past.

This fact points to a particular stance of mind: it has *happened*, and we are trying to find its meaning. It's a mode of memory we are dealing with, an actuality as remembered. History is concerned with actuality; its past must be provable. The fiction writer's past is not provable; it *may* be imagined. His characters *may* be imagined. But historical characters are imagined, too. They are brought into the picture of an imagined world. For how do we know the world of "history," unless the historian has "imagined" it?

Now the big difference here between history and fiction is that the historian does not know his imagined world; he knows *about* it, and he must know all he can about it, because he wants to find the facts *behind* that world. But the fiction writer must claim to *know* the *inside* of his world for better or for worse. He mostly fails, but he claims to know the inside of his characters, the undocumentable inside. Historians are concerned with the truth *about*, with knowledge *about*, the fiction writer with the knowledge *of*. And neither of these "knowledges" is to be achieved in any perfect form. But the kinds of "knowledge" *are*. This is a fundamental difference, it seems to me.

This leads to another distinction. Fiction is an art, one of the several arts. I want to read a little passage—the most radical passage I could find—about art as distinguished from other human activities. "Either art is a pure, irreducible activity, one that provides its own peculiar content, its own morality—it includes itself in its own meaning; or art is, on the other hand, a pleasanter form of presenting facts, meanings and truths pertaining to other realms of reality like history, sociology, morality, where they exist in purer and fuller form." This states the distinction quite coldly. For fiction is an art, like painting or music—with one difference. Its materials are more charged with all the human commitments and recalcitrances and roughnesses.

Now here is where the rub comes, I think. The materials that go into a piece of fiction may be drawn from history or human experience, but their factuality gives them no special

privilege, as contrasted with imagined materials. They have, as "materials" for it, the same status, and nothing more than that. But they come in with all the recalcitrances and the weights and the passions of the real world. The simplest example I can think of is this. Take *Hamlet*, or any tragedy we all admire and respond to. It is dealing with the recalcitrances of human pain, confusion and error. We know these things all too well: the pain, confusion, and error of our own lives. But we come out of the play not weeping, but feeling pretty good, and we go down to the beer parlor and talk about it. Something's happened to the pain, confusion, error. It has happened only because we put the pain and error into perspective, and look at it—to see it and at the same time not quite feel it. We see it as if it had happened a long time ago—to us, but to somebody else, too.

There is, however, always a point where the exigences and the pains of the materials of fiction or drama or poetry are too great to be absorbed. This recalcitrancy, which is the basis of contention between the form and the content of literature, can become too great. The really bigoted Catholic cannot read Milton; the really bigoted Protestant can't read Dante. In reading literature we have to make allowances for our theologies and our beliefs. But there is a point where it cracks. Let's recognize that. There is a form in which the recalcitrant material—that is, the practical commitment in relation to it—violates the vision of humanity, the long-range beauty of contemplation that is art. Let's leave it there for the moment.

ELLISON

I think I'll go back and try to talk about American historiography and American fiction. I would start by suggesting that they're both artificial; both are forms of literature, and I would suggest further that American history grows primarily out of the same attitudes of mind, and attitudes toward chronology, which gave birth to our great tall stories. Constance Rourke reminded us that we began to define ourselves and to create ourselves through the agency of the word, of the imagination, the fictional imagination—and that basically we are liars. I would suggest that historians are responsible liars. Liars are not bad people; I am by profession a liar. The role of lying is like the role of masquerading. Yeats has a quotation, which I have used somewhere, about the necessity of putting on the mask in order to achieve one's dreams, one's idea of one's self. So when I put a scar on my face or part my hair, you understand that I'm trying to achieve some idealistic image; or if I wear it in Afro-style or conk it, you understand that that too is

simply a human assertion against the flux and flow of time and a desire to modify that which was given. And it is here that the novelist and the historian appear to part company. The historian is dedicated to chronology. He can suppress, he can emphasize, he can project, and he can carve out his artifact; and this helps us to imagine ourselves, to project ourselves, to achieve certain goals, certain identities; but he must obey the order of the calendar and the tides of political fortune. I can't, here in New Orleans, fail to point out that so much of American history has turned upon the racial situation in the country. This is a given and accepted fact now. It's argued over and over again. The problem that we have to deal with on the side of history is: How much did you choose to put in, how much did you leave out, what did it lead to, and how to interpret the results. I'm going to be a little nasty here and suggest that our written history has been as "official" as any produced in any communist country—only in a democratic way: individuals write it instead of committees. Written history is to social conduct and social arrangements in this country very much like the relationship between myth and ritual. And myth justifies and "explains" facts. Now it's all human, it is understandable and it has to be evaluated, because complex personal and political interests are involved in such intricate ways that arriving at objective evaluations is extremely difficult. But, thank God, there have been a few novelists who decided to tell the "truth" in their own unique and devious ways. Isn't that nasty?

For here the novelists have a special, though difficult, freedom. Time is their enemy, and while chronology is the ally of the historian, for the novelist it is something to manipulate or even to destroy. And this, I think, is why we wish that historians, within the limitations which they embrace and to which they dedicate themselves, could do a little better by chronology, by events as they actually unfold. Because in certain ways the historians have, thankfully, taken a broader cut of the American experience than the novelists. By nature they possess a greater patience before facts, before events. If you really want to find out what happened in the United States over all these years, you know that *some* historian has written something about it. That is one of the glories of historical writing in this country; there has always been somebody who, for some reason, has tried to say, "Well, the consequences of this fact actually exist, this event actually occurred, and I think it is related in such and such a way to the total reality." But too often history has been an official statement, and it has danced attendance to political arrangements.

Fiction, on the other hand, as it manipulates reality, as it tries to get at those abiding human predicaments which are ageless and timeless, has fought with time, has fought with the realities as envisioned by official history, and by rearranging experience in artful ways it has tried to tell us in small ways the symbolic significance of what actually happened. If you want to know something about the dynamics of the South, of interpersonal relationships in the South from, roughly, 1874 until today, you don't go to historians; not even to Negro historians. You go to William Faulkner and Robert Penn Warren, or you go to the popular arts. You have to read the latter very carefully of course, because they are the biggest liars of all. But somehow the novelists try to deal with unpleasant facts, difficult facts, and Faulkner dealt with the most unpleasant facts of race. I suppose that's why American history has not been ultimately concerned with tragedy, while literature, at its best, always has. It's always trying to find ways of dealing with the unpleasant facts, and the only way, the profoundest human way, of dealing with the unpleasant, is to place it in conjunction with the pleasant. Thus fiction, at its best, moves ever toward a blending of the tragic with the comic—or towards that mode which we know as the Blues.

I would suggest, then, that American novelists have a special role which should not be confused with the role of the writer of history; which for them is *verboten*. The moment you say something explicit about history in a novel, everybody's going to rise up and knock the Hell out of you, because they suspect that you are trying to take advantage of a form of authority which is sacred. History is sacred, you see, and no matter how false to actual events it might be. But fiction is anything but sacred. By fact and by convention fiction is a projection from one man's mind, of one man's imagination. An American novelist tries to integrate all of the diversity of our people and our regions, our religions, and so on, into an imaginative whole. And through that imaginative integration he attempts to seize the abiding circumstances, the abiding problems, the abiding and time-tested forms of humanity—heroism, truth and failure and love and death—all of the ramifications of those experiences which make us human.

I think that we have something very important going here. We work the same side of the street. So keep us honest and we'll keep you historians honest. I think that Red Warren, who has always been concerned with history, has offered us an example of how to confront the problem of history as the novelist should. I think that when he wrote about a great Amer-

ican politician who governed his state and refused to intrude into the area of the historian, he refused because he was canny enough to realize that he could never get *that* particular man into fiction. And yet, I believe that he did use that man to bring into focus within his own mind many, many important facts about power, politics and class and loyalty. So today we possess an essence of that man presented in a highly imaginative, moving and enduring way, without the novelist having taken anything away from that man. And without his having added anything to one who we know was an important historical figure—except the art-created possibility of looking at him through the enriching eyes of Red Warren's imagination. Thanks to Warren's art we may now view that man through that heightened sense of the past which both history and literature grant to all who are truly involved with the mystery of human existence.

STYRON

I have never talked much in public. I don't mean to sound shy, but I haven't, nor have I taught, and I admire the eloquence that has preceded me, and only wish that I were able to speak in an impromptu manner as well as my good friends have done. As a consequence, I have resorted to a composition, fairly brief, some of it composed on Eastern Airlines today, with a terrible and ominous post-election traumatic blues all over me. So I'm going to read it, and if you shut your eyes, perhaps I can give you a subtle feeling that I am not reading it.

Last spring in an exchange in the *Nation*, I quoted at some length from a volume called *The Historical Novel*, by the great Hungarian Marxist critic, Georg Lukács, in an effort to explain my attitude toward the freedom of movement and choice any good novelist must exercise when writing historical fiction. Historical fiction has been largely discredited in this country, doubtless due to the fact that its practitioners, most of them, have aimed at titillating a predominantly female audience, an audience one hopes that has now been preempted by the Late, Late show. What I am speaking about, of course, is the serious historical novel: literature in the tradition of Scott, Stendhal, Tolstoy, Pushkin, Faulkner, and Warren, and it is to this great genre that Lukács has addressed himself, in my opinion, with more intelligence, passion, and penetration than any other modern literary critic. As Irving Howe has written of Lukács, "Unlike so many Marxist critics, Lukács turns to literature not because it provides him with political opportunities but because he has been involved with it for a lifetime and has ex-

perienced the passion of the true scholar. . . . Repeatedly Lukács turns to 'the increasing concreteness of the novel in its grasp of the historical peculiarity of characters and events,' repeatedly to that self-reflectiveness in the dominant characters of the modern novel, which he sees as the sense of history become part of experience and thereby transformed into a dynamic agent reflecting and acting upon the dialectal contradictions of the outer world."¹

It seemed to me that some of Lukács' observations on the historical novel and the novelist's responsibility are more trenchant and wise than any I could make about the matter, and certainly record as well as I could my own feelings about the intricate and subtle relationship between historical fact and fanciful conjecture, between historical faithfulness and literary license, along with other troubling problems that beset the unhappy wretch who dares tackle this literary form. Let me then quote again from Lukács, hoping that these maxims will serve as representative of my own sentiments regarding the fiction writer's very difficult obligation to make sense out of history.

"The deeper and more genuinely historical a writer's knowledge of a period," Lukács says, "the more freely will he be able to move about inside his subject and the less tied will he feel to individual historical data." Speaking of Sir Walter Scott, for instance, he observes: "Scott's extraordinary genius lay in the fact that he gave the historical novel just such themes as would allow for this 'free movement,' and so cleared the way for its development; whereas the earlier traditions of his so-called predecessors had obstructed all such freedom of movement, preventing even a genuine talent from developing. Naturally, a special difficulty is involved in the treatment of specifically historical subject-matter. Every really original writer who portrays a new outlook upon a certain field has to contend with the prejudices of his readers. But the image which the public has of any familiar historical figure need not necessarily be a false one. Indeed, with the growth of a real historical sense and of real historical knowledge it becomes more and more accurate. But even this correct image may in certain circumstances be a hindrance to the writer who wishes to reproduce the spirit of an age faithfully and authentically. It would require a particularly happy accident for all the well-known

1. Irving Howe, "Preface to the American Edition," Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel* (Beacon Press, 1962), pp. 9-10.

and attested actions of a familiar historical figure to correspond to the purposes of literature. . . ."

In another context, Lukács expands on this theme of what is not merely the likelihood but the necessity of the writer being allowed great latitude in structuring his vision of the past. He says, "What matters in the novel is fidelity in the reproduction of the material foundations of the life of a given period, its manners and the feelings and thoughts deriving from these. This means, as we have also seen, that the novel is much more closely bound to the specifically historical, individual moments of a period than is drama. But this never means being tied to any particular historical facts. On the contrary, the novelist must be at liberty to treat these as he likes,"—and this is an important phrase, I think—"if he is to reproduce the much more complex and ramifying totality with historical faithfulness. From the standpoint of the historical novel, too, it is always a matter of chance whether an actual, historical fact, character or story will lend itself to the particular method by which a great novelist conveys his historical faithfulness."

Finally, quoting Pushkin, Lukács remarks: "Truth of passions, verisimilitude of feelings in imagined circumstances—that is what our mind demands of the dramatic writer." And he declares, "the writer's historical fidelity consists in the faithful artistic reproduction of the great collisions, the great crises and turning-points in history. To express this *historical* conception in an adequate artistic form the writer may treat individual facts with as much licence as he likes, for mere fidelity to the individual facts of history without this connection is utterly valueless."²

Needless to say, the foregoing thoughts merely skim part of the surface of Lukács philosophy of history and its relation to literature. Yet in his unyielding insistence that a writer's responsibility is not to the dead baggage of facts, but to the unfettering and replenishing power of his own imagination, that imagination which at its best can alone reveal ultimate truths, Lukács' observations seem to me enormously provocative, and I hope they provide substance for further discussion this evening.

WOODWARD

Thank you very much, gentlemen. As an historian, I gather from the comments of Mr. Warren that the novelists deal with

2. All quotations are from Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, trans. from the German by Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (Beacon Press, 1962), pp. 166-168.

the inside of history, leaving the outside, I suppose, to the historian; from Mr. Ellison, that historians are essentially liars, and this leaves the truth to the novelists; from Mr. Styron that fidelity to fact is not an obligation of novelists, and this *emancipates* them. Am I too far off base, gentlemen, in saying that it seems to me that you are saying you are going to write a "super-history," or at least a better history than historians can write?

ELLISON

No. I'm suggesting that we have reached a great crisis in American history, and we are now going to have a full American history. You, Vann, began to initiate this movement, as far as I am concerned. We're beginning to go back and to evaluate those realities of American historical experience which were ruled out officially. Henry Steele Commager and a lot of other people, such as Samuel Morison, have turned flip-flops in recent years. I used to be outraged when I read some of the stuff that they wrote, because there is, certainly in the Negro part of the country and in the Southern part of the country, a stream of history which is still as tightly connected with folklore and the oral tradition as official history is connected with the tall tale. I think that we are beginning to realize that.

For instance, the only public school I ever attended was named after Frederick Douglass. The people who walked there from Tennessee and the Carolinas have a sense of history which is only now beginning to get into the history books. Part of this is legend. Part of this is myth. But so much of it—so very much of it—is what actually happened, happened to them. And if official history, if conscious historians do not take cognizance of this experience, then what a critic like Lukács says has very little validity. He was, after all, writing about European countries, with no divided history. Of course I know that the Owen Glendower that Shakespeare gives us in the historical plays is certainly not the Owen Glendower of the Welsh, it's the Shakespearean and Elizabethan notion of Owen Glendower. But here we are dedicated to a different kind of democracy. We have all of these things which happened, and they happened in such great variety. I'm afraid to say what Louisiana experience is, what Louisiana history is, even of the period of Huey Long, because I used to hear things—and highly favorable things, about Long, for instance—from Negro students that I attended college with at Tuskegee.

I think that one of the things that we want to discuss here is the rhetoric of fiction. If you project in fiction a version of

history, then you have an obligation to think about these other feed-ins from the common experience which are going to put to question your particular projection of history. I don't think that history is Truth. I think it's another form of man trying to find himself, and to come to grips with his own complexity, but within the frame of chronology and time. Here in the United States we have had a political system which wouldn't allow me to tell my story officially. Much of it is not in the history textbooks. Certain historians and untrained observers did their jobs, often very faithfully, but many of them have been forgotten except by scholars and historians, and the story they recorded was altered to justify racial attitudes and practices. But somehow, through our Negro American oral tradition and through the names given to children and to public institutions—those places with which white society was not too concerned as long as they did not challenge the public order—these reminders of the past as *Negroes* recalled it found existence and were passed along. Historical figures continued to live in stories of and theories about the human and social dynamics of slavery, and about the effects of political decisions rendered during the Reconstruction. Assertions of freedom and revolts were recalled along with triumphs of labor in the fields and on the dance floor; feats of eating and drinking and of fornication, of religious conversion and physical endurance, and of artistic and athletic achievements. In brief, the broad ramifications of human life as *Negroes* have experienced it were marked and passed along. This record exists in oral form and it constitutes the internal history of values by which my people lived even as they were being forced to accommodate themselves to those forces and arrangements of society that were sanctioned by official history. The result has imposed upon *Negroes* a high sensitivity to the ironies of historical writing and created a profound skepticism concerning the validity of most reports on what the past was like.

And so, when a novelist moves into the arena of history and takes on the obligations of the historian he has to be aware that he faces a tough rhetorical problem. He has to sell *me*, convince me, that despite the racial divisions and antagonisms in the U. S., his received version of history is not drastically opposed to mine. Because I am conditioned to assume that his idea of the heroic individual is apt to violate my sense of heroism;—for instance, Bedford Forrest is considered a hero by many whites but it would be an heroic task for me, or for most blacks, to see him so. I can, however, accept Sam Feathers or Lucas Beauchamp in Faulkner, in ways that I couldn't ac-

cept Jim in *Huckleberry Finn*. For me, Jim was not rounded enough. And yet, he was involved fictionally with serious historical matters. But Lucas Beauchamp was involved with serious historical and personal matters—but (and this is an important *but*) he was mainly involved in those things which historians would not talk about, and this is one of the important roles which fiction has played, especially the fiction of southern writers: it has tried to tell that part of the human truth which we could not accept or face up to in much historical writing because of social, racial and political considerations.

WARREN

Our little girl, who is about 11 years old, was studying for an exam in American History, and she said to me, "hear my lesson." I heard her lesson and she said things I thought were pretty preposterous, but I didn't say anything about it, because I knew she was saying her lesson for an exam. I was too smart to say anything about it, but she was watching my my face. "Oh, poppy!" she said, "this is for an exam; this is not the truth. I know better than this."

Now this is not the historians' fault. This is the people who write text books of history. It's very different. Official histories may be tests, or orators at the Fourth of July, or textbook makers, but not historians. They are very different, you see. And girls of ten years old get this point quickly; they understand it perfectly. By the time they are seventeen or eighteen, in college, they may lose it. But they know it at ten years old. They watch things much more shrewdly than their elders; they have no stake in it except truth—truth, and grades. They are quite different: they know this, you see.

The historian is after this truth, and it's a good truth. So is the novelist. They are both trying to say what life feels like to them. They have different ground rules for it. Let's assume that both are conditioned by their societies at every given moment—at every moment in history, in time. Now, the breaking out process is always an act of imagination both for the historian and the novelist. The rules are different, though, in this sense: the historian must prove points, document points, that the novelist doesn't have to document. Yet without that sense of documentation, the knowledge that It Is Possible, the novelist can't operate either. He is conditioned always by the sense of this documentation—that it is historically possible. He himself is tied to the facts of life. He must respect them. Insofar as he departs from them by imagination, he departs in terms of the possibilities laid down by these ground rules of

fact—psychological fact, historical fact, sociological fact, all the various kinds of fact. Those are his ground rules. He can take a new view of them, but he cannot violate any one of them to a point which invalidates acceptance. That's the big proviso here. It varies a great deal. The materials that go into his work come from the rough-textured life around him, made up of beliefs and facts and attitudes of all kinds. A bigoted Catholic can't read Milton, and a bigoted Protestant can't read Dante, but a civilized Catholic can read Milton with joy. There's a point, though, where one's commitment to basic ideas and basic materials, by reason of bigotry or something else, makes one incapable of accepting the total vision of an art—of a novel or a poem, or whatever. Let's face this fact. The autonomy of the art is always subject to the recalcitrance of the materials and to your own lack of self-understanding.

STYRON

I don't know what I'm going to say to add to this confusion. We've been dealing in very intelligent abstractions, all of which make me feel that maybe we should get a little bit more concrete. I like that phrase of Red Warren's just now: "the autonomy of the art is subject to the recalcitrance of the materials." This is something that I have had preying on my mind for some time, in regard to a private argument, which became extraordinarily public, having to do with a book I wrote not too long ago. It occurred to me in thinking of this particular book, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, that in all of the extraordinary flak and anti-anti-missile barrage that has surrounded it, no one, insofar as I know (and I don't mean only people who criticized it from the black point of view, but a number of my white commentators as well; and I bring this up not out of any immodesty, but simply because I'm more comfortable in talking about particulars rather than aesthetic abstractions)—no one has conceived of this book, which does deal with history indeed, as a separate entity which has its own autonomy, to use Red Warren's phrase, its own metaphysics, its own reason for being as an aesthetic object. No one has ventured, except for several people in private (bright people, whom I admire), to suggest that a work which deals with history can at the same time be a metaphorical plan, a metaphorical diagram for a writer's attitude toward human existence, which presumably is one of the writer's preoccupations anyway—that, despite all the obfuscation which surrounds the really incredible controversy about the rightness and wrongness of racial attitudes, wrong readings of Ulrich B. Phillips, Stanley Elkins, and so

forth, a work of literature might have its own being, its own fountain, its own reality, its own power, its own appeal, which derive from factors that don't really relate to history. And this is why, again, I'm intrigued by Red Warren's phrase, "the autonomy of the art is subject to the recalcitrance of the materials."

I would like to suggest that, in the endless rancor and bitterness which tends to collect and coalesce around controversial literary works, it might also be wise to pause and step back (I'm not speaking of my own work alone)—and regard a work as containing many metaphors, many reasons for being. This is true for all the literary works I admire. They are works (and I would include, among modern works, books by my distinguished contemporaries to my right) which do exist outside of history, which gain their power from history, to be sure, which are fed by a passionate comprehension of what history does to people and to things, but which have to have other levels of understanding, and have to be judged by other levels of understanding. It may be that in our perhaps overly modern and desperate preoccupation with history, which can be so valuable, we lose sight of the ineffable othernesses which go to make a work of art. At the risk of repeating myself once more, I would like to say that these factors have been forgotten.

WARREN

May I say something, Vann? It strikes me that the question is one of the basic tensions of our whole lives. We can't have an easy formulation for this, an easy way out of the question. We are stuck with the fact that life involves passions and concerns and antipathies and anguish about the materials of life itself—whatever goes on in our hearts and outside of ourselves. This is what good literature involves. If you couldn't carry these things into literature, literature would be meaningless. It would be a mere parlor trick. All this—the concerns, the confusion—goes into literature; it goes into the arts. It exists in terms of the experience that the writer describes in literature, presented there in and of himself. They are not the same thing for everybody; a little different, you know, for each person, frequently quite different. But they all go in as passion, as commitments of various kinds. Yet at the same time the thing described must be made objectively itself. Now take Glendower, to whom Ralph was referring. Now nobody here is a Welsh nationalist, I trust. If there is one here . . .

ELLISON

Ralph Ellison is.

WARREN

No, you're not; *you* aren't Welsh.

ELLISON

I'm a Welsh nationalist. But I also admire art.

WARREN

I'm a Confederate. So here we are. We have personal loyalties and problems, you see. But in *Henry IV, Part One*, Glendower didn't bother us in terms of the great theme of the play. People are not living and dying over Glendower today. This is a purely pragmatic approach to it, you see; what can we surrender, what immediate needs can we give up, how can we withdraw our commitments in a given region of this play—in materials of the play—to gain a larger view? Now I couldn't care less who won the battle, at Shrewsbury, personally. It was a long time ago, and it isn't very important now. . . .

What I care about is the pattern of the human struggle there—as we know it in relation to Hotspur on one hand, and to the cold calculators on the other hand, and to Hal, as a kind of Golden Mean, and then, at last, to Falstaff, with all of his great tummy and great wit, and his ironic view of history and morality—outside of all schematic views. We are seeing a pattern of human possibility that bears on all of our lives, a pattern there that we see every day—the Hotspurs, or those cold calculators like Westmoreland, and then the people like Hal, who try to ride it through and in their perfect adaptability be all things to all men, and drink with Falstaff and kick him out at the end (in the next play, of course). We see this happening all the time. Shakespeare wrote a great vision of human life, but it's not about Welsh nationalism.

ELLISON

Yes. And I'm all for the autonomy of fiction; that's why I say that novelists should leave history alone. But I would also remind us that the work of fiction comes alive through a collaboration between the reader and the writer. This is where the rhetoric comes in. If you move far enough into the historical past, you don't have that problem. I don't give a damn what happened to Owen Glendower, actually, but as a writer, if I were to write a fiction based upon a great hero, a military man, whose name is Robert E. Lee, I'd damn well be very careful about what I fed my reader, in order for him to recreate in his imagination and through his sense of history what that gentle-

man was. Because Lee is no longer simply an historical figure. He is a figure who lives within us. He is a figure which shapes ideals of conduct and of forbearance and of skill, military and so on. This is *inside*, and not something that writers can merely be arbitrary about. The freedom of the fiction writer, the novelist, is one of the great freedoms possible for the individual to exercise. But it is not absolute. Thus, one, without hedging his bets, has to be aware that he does operate within an area dense with prior assumptions.

WARREN

Quite right.

ELLISON

This I say without any discussion of Bill's personal problem. I haven't read his book, and he knows that—well, maybe he doesn't. Our house burned down so I didn't get to read it at first, and after the controversy I deliberately did not read it. One thing that I know is that he isn't a bigot, he isn't a racist, and all of that. That's beside the point. But there are very serious problems involved. I am known as a bastard by certain of my militant friends because I am not what they call a part of the Movement. That is, they figure I don't cuss out white folks enough. All right; I cuss them out in my own ways. But this isn't the real problem. The real problem is to create symbolic actions which are viable specifically, and which move across all of our differences and all of the diversities of the atmosphere, and allow us to say, "yes," just as Red is saying about Shakespeare. This tells us something of what it means to be a man under these particular circumstances. But at the same time you don't have the freedom to snatch any and everybody, and completely recreate them. This is why you must lie and disguise a historical figure. You can not move into the area, or impose yourself into the authority, of the historian, because he is dealing with chronology. The moment you put yourself in a book, the moment you put any known figures into the book, then somebody is going to say, "But he didn't have that mole on that side of his face; it was on *that* side. You said that he had a wife; he didn't have a wife. You said that he beat his wife at three o'clock in the afternoon; no, he beat her before breakfast, and they got up at five." Facts are a tyranny for the novelist. Facts get you into all of this trouble. On the other hand, Bill, I would suggest that whether you like the dissonance you picked up, you've written a very powerful novel, and it's very self-evident. Don't kick it. Don't knock it. Just leave history alone.

STYRON

I'm not kicking, Ralph. I'm not. No. I'm glad you authenticate what I said through the voice of Lukács, that facts *per se* are preposterous. They are like the fuzz that collects in the top of dirty closets. They don't really mean anything.

WARREN

I wouldn't go that far.

ELLISON

They *mean* something. That's why you're in trouble.

STYRON

I'll dispute that.

ELLISON

Okay.

STYRON

It depends on what facts you're talking about. Let's pare this down. Obviously when somebody like Lukács, or somebody like myself, claims that it's necessary to dispense with facts, it's not to say that promiscuous blindness, a disavowal of evidence, is what the novelist has as a dirty little secret all of his own. It's not that at all. It's simply to say that with a certain absolute boldness, a novelist dealing with history has to be able to say that such and such a fact is totally irrelevant, and to Hell with the person who insists that it has any real, utmost relevance. It's not to say that, in any bland or even dishonest way, a novelist is free to go about his task of rendering history with a complete shrugging off of the facts. This is not what Lukács says; it is not what I say. It is simply that certain facts which history presents us with are, on the one hand, either unimportant, or else they can be dispensed with out of hand, because to yield to them would be to yield or to compromise the novelist's own aesthetic honesty. Certain things won't fit into a novel, won't go in simply because the story won't tell itself if such a fact is there. This is what Lukács meant. It's what I mean when I say that a brute, an idiotic preoccupation with crude fact is death to a novel, and death to the novelist. The primary thing is the free use and the bold use of the liberating imagination which, dispensing with useless fact, will clear the cobwebs away and will show how it really was. This is all I mean about fact and its use or misuse.

ELLISON

You mean really what was in your imagination, not in historical reality, don't you, Bill?

STYRON

Well isn't that what we're talking about? I mean, when we read *War and Peace* we are reading about Tolstoy's imagination. I don't want to make any invidious comparisons; I'm just saying that anybody who deals, any creative imagination which deals with the fabric of history leaves you, if he's a good novelist, with a sense of an imaginative truth which transcends, in this case, what the historian can give you. An historian can tell you just what happened at Borodino, but only Tolstoy, often dispensing with facts, can tell you what it really was to be a soldier at Borodino. This is what the distinction is, and this is what I insist is the novelist's prerogative when he is faced with the materials of history.

WOODWARD

I'm interested in this question of fact myself. One of our distinguished novelists present, Red Warren, has written a novel about an historian. I think that Jack Burden was an historian, really. At least he was the narrator of *All the King's Men*, and he had two historical investigations in his career. One of them, you'll remember, was the investigation of the truth about an ancestor, I believe a great-uncle named Cass Mastern, and he said that the investigation was a failure. It was a failure because he was simply looking for the truth. The second investigation was about a man who turned out (though he didn't know it at the time) to be his father, Judge Irwin, and this investigation proved to be a great success. And he said that the reason for that success was that he was only looking for facts. The facts resulted in the suicide of his father, and a tragedy. So an interesting distinction was made there between facts and truth. Jack Burden, incidentally, was an historian, a seeker for a Ph.D., as some of us have been.

WARREN

He didn't get it.

WOODWARD

He didn't get it, and the reason, as you say, was he did not have to know Cass Mastern to get the degree. He only had to know the facts about Cass Mastern's world. I would be interested in hearing you discuss this distinction between fact and truth. I think it's to the nub of our discussion, perhaps.

WARREN

I'll tell you how it happened. I'll do it in two ways. One is how it happened to me, and the other is what could be said about it afterwards; they are quite different things. Jack Burden himself was a pure technical accident, a way to tell the story. And you stumble into that, because you are stuck with your problem of telling a story; you have to make him up as you go along. But that's another problem. The question about his peculiar researches, as I look back on them, is simply this. Being a very badly disorganized young fellow, he really didn't want the Ph.D. anyway. He stumbled on his family history, involving a character in his family, a couple of generations back, who had devoted his life to trying to find a moral position for himself. And this young man, without any moral orientation at all that I could figure out (he's an old-fashioned lost boy, not the new kind—there have always been these lost boys), didn't want his Ph.D., and he didn't know what to do with himself. He didn't know his mother, he didn't like his father, and so forth. At first he couldn't face the fact that in his own blood, there was a man who *had* faced up to a moral problem in a deep way. He couldn't follow it through, could not bear to face the comparison to the other young man. Then, he couldn't face the truth otherwise, without this piece of research. Later, when he had the job of getting the dirt on a character in the novel, he did get all the facts. He gets all the facts, and the guy turns out to be his father, who commits suicide. It's a parable, I didn't mean it to be one; I wasn't trying to make a parable of truth and fact. It just worked out that way. You sort of stumble into these things. It's a parable, as you pointed out to me tonight; I hadn't thought about this before. Well, the facts Jack Burden gets are deadly things. Facts may kill. For one thing, they can kill myths.

WOODWARD

We're working here toward a distinction between fact and fiction. Fact comes, I believe, from the Latin: *factum est*, a thing done, an event. It has acquired a lot of prestige in historical circles; it gets talked about all the time—facts, something you dig up like gold, you unearth. Fiction is something that's created, something that's made, something that is made up perhaps of facts and a lot of guesses. I think of two protagonists in Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*, Shreve McCannon and Quentin Compson, who are really seeking historical truth, and they are doing it with facts and evidence, and bits and pieces, and they go on and on, trying to create this image and to discover the truth about Colonel Sutpen. What they are trying to do seems to me

very similar to what the historian is trying to do. He gets together a lot of evidence, and he "creates" the truth.

ELLISON

But they are characters in a fiction, Vann, not historians. So there's a difference.

WOODWARD

Yes, but the historian seems to me to be doing much the same thing with the evidence he gathers. He puts it together. Cleanth Brooks has put page after page of the evidence of *Absalom, Absalom!* together to show how this truth is arrived at.

There are some people here who came to ask questions of these writers, and I think we ought to give them an opportunity.

FIRST QUESTIONER

I would like to direct my question to Mr. Styron. Mr. Styron, Mr. Ellison said that the novelist doesn't have the right to distort facts completely. He said his power is not absolute when it comes to fact. Then you also talked about imaginative truth, and that certain things don't fit into a novel. I'd like to know about the fact that Nat Turner was married—didn't that fit into your novel?

STYRON

It seems to me I've heard this before. I can only reiterate what I have said despairingly in public and even more despairingly in cold print, that in the evidence which was available to me when some years ago I began to collect the few basic materials to write this book, there was no evidence which told me he had such a wife.

FIRST QUESTIONER

Didn't Thomas Gray's *Confessions* say that?

STYRON

No. I'm very sorry. Or is that a rhetorical question?

FIRST QUESTIONER

No, I read an article in *Ebony* by Lerone Bennett.

STYRON

I read it, too. He's wrong. No, if you read the *Confessions* yourself, the original *Confessions*, this is one of the amazing

things about it. He mentions all the rest of his family, but mentions no wife. Once again, in an essay I wrote about this controversy, I said that, without laying aside my belief in the irrelevance of certain facts, this on the other hand would have been so important that if I had been given any kind of substantial evidence that he had a wife, then as a novelist I would have felt compelled to create a wife for him. But I only ask again, certainly not for the last time, that people who, like yourself, constantly castigate me for leaving his wife out, consult the evidence yourself, and use a little reason.

FIRST QUESTIONER

Is Margaret Whitehead, in the evidence, completely obsessed in his mind?

STYRON

Margaret Whitehead is a part of my fictional imagination. I have no apologies for her. But as for the fact of a black wife, I submit to you, humbly, that the evidence does not show that he had one; and therefore, I think reason dictates that it was perfectly all right for me to leave her out.

FIRST QUESTIONER

I have a number of other questions, but I'm only going to ask one more. You said that a novel has its own reason for being. What's the reason for being for *The Confessions of Nat Turner*? Because I read it and I couldn't find any.

STYRON

Well, I don't know how to answer a question like that. In fact, I don't think I'll try. It's so majestic a question that I don't think I'm able to answer it.

SECOND QUESTIONER

Seeing as though calling historians liars tonight has been quite popular, I can remember that the last time I called you a liar, it became very bitter. It seems as though we confront each other from the North to the South. I met you in Massachusetts this summer, and now all the way down in New Orleans I'm here to call you a liar again.

ELLISON

Which one of us, please?

SECOND QUESTIONER

I'm primarily concerned with Styron. I met him this summer at Harvard. I think possibly we need to take a look at the revolutionary black figure, Nat Turner, to see what he actually represents to black people. I think when we talk about slavery and revolution that it has to be looked at from a psychiatric or a psychological viewpoint. Okay, we take a look at the ten blacks who responded to your book on *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. In this group we have C. V. Hamilton, we have Alvin Poussaint. These men have really delved into the thing; they have looked at it from a psychological viewpoint.

I heard Warren say a few minutes ago that fact can destroy, that fact can be deadly. I contend that imagination and lying can also be deadly and can also destroy. Now let's take a look at this a bit further. First of all we see two major bases from which this book was written. We see some religious ties with Nat Turner—that he was a preacher or something, who had some vision about killing white folk. Secondly, I remember your statement that the white woman was a higher symbol or goal for the black man or the black slave—something that he looked up to and wanted and desired. Okay, I remember asking you that question up North, and I want you to tell these Southern whites this same thing. I want to know this: if the white woman was the symbol for Nat Turner to look up to and this was why he wanted sexual relations, and had all these desires, then, since that black woman [in the novel] was below the white man, what kind of image was she?

STYRON

Have you paused for a question now? Well, let me tackle all of these again, one by one. Indeed you have haunted me. You're my *bête noire*, I'm afraid. I recall you from Harvard Summer School with terror. Now here you are again. I won't reply to your *ad hominem* remarks about my "lies," and so on, but I will try to reply directly to you about what I conceive to be the essential truth about Nat Turner's relationship with white women. Forgive me if I paraphrase you badly, but I think you are asking me if I sincerely believe that Nat Turner really yearned, carnally and otherwise, for a white girl. Am I right?

SECOND QUESTIONER

No, you're wrong.

STYRON

Well then, would you please rephrase it?

SECOND QUESTIONER

My thing was, if you placed the white woman above the black slave—the male slave, and said that this was something that he wanted because she was above or higher than him, then how do you explain the white man reaching below him to go back in the quarters, to get the black women out of those slave quarters, which is the cause of many of my brothers and sisters sitting here tonight being of different pigmentation of skin?

STYRON

I don't think at any place in the book did I for an instant deny the very implicit fact that white men were down in the quarters at all times. The reason that I didn't necessarily describe this happening in any great detail is simply that it didn't suit my artistic needs. But if you are implying that somewhere in the book there is a vacuum, that somewhere in the book there is an implication that Negro women were not violated more or less systematically by white men who ruthlessly went down in the cabins, then you have totally misread the book. Because it's there.

SECOND QUESTIONER

You see, the facts you included would *sell*. The whites *wanted* to read that Nat Turner was not a strong, black, revolutionary figure, but that he had certain sexual desires that drove him on. All right, you talk about his killing women and children. Let's take a look at the *Ten Black Writers* and how they analyze that. It seems that most of the men were away at a meeting. This made no difference. You talk about children; you make me believe that Nat Turner walked up and just stabbed babies or beat them in the head—which possibly would have been all right, because possibly he had the insight to know that these same little white babies would one day be the slave masters of his children, wherever they were. So wiping out the white children would be the very same thing as wiping out those adult honkies. When he burned down a house, he got white women and children and anybody else who was in the house. It made no difference who was in the house; when the house went up in flames, everybody and everything in the house went up, not just women and children.

STYRON

What is your complaint?

SECOND QUESTIONER

My complaint is this: don't just say he killed women and children, like the man had a hang-up or was afraid of white men, because explicitly the ten blacks tell you how he knocked some honky down and beat him to death, and then laid his wife down and killed her, right next to him. He wasn't afraid of white men; he killed white men, white babies, white women, white cats, white dogs, everything that was in the neighborhood.

STYRON

Indeed he did. I tried to point out something to you, I think. I shall try again. (You reappear in my dreams; I knew somehow that you'd find me here. From Cambridge to New Orleans; it's more than the mind can encompass.) Anyway, if I may quote, in a sort of contradistinction to your ten black critics, one of the people who criticized the ten black critics, in this case Eugene Genovese. I think he pointed out, at least to my satisfaction, that if you will read the evidence—if you read the crude evidence of Nat Turner and his insurrection, and you can read it in twenty minutes—you will get the impression, and any rational person will get the impression when he is finished, of a ruthless and perhaps psychotic fanatic, a religious fanatic who, lacking any plan or purpose—admittedly, because it is in the testimony, lacking any plan or purpose—takes five or six rather bedraggled followers and goes off on a ruthless, directionless, aimless forty-eight-hour rampage of total destruction, in which the victims are, by a large majority, women and little children.

SECOND QUESTIONER

But *white*.

STYRON

No. Wait a minute. This is the crude evidence; this is what Lukács would say. These are the facts. Deal with them. I submit to you—I submit to any rational intelligence in this room who would allow himself twenty minutes—that this is the impression you would get. A deranged—

SECOND QUESTIONER

It isn't the impression that I got.

STYRON

Well, I'm sorry.

SECOND QUESTIONER

It may be a white impression.

STYRON

I don't think so.

SECOND QUESTIONER

Quite clearly.

STYRON

I don't think so. What Genovese was generous enough to grant me, in my dealings with this man, was that I supplied him with the motivation. I gave him a rationale. I gave him all of the confusions and desperations, troubles, worries.

SECOND QUESTIONER

But look. Let's stop here.

STYRON

Excuse me. Will you hear me out?

SECOND QUESTIONER

He was a slave, and that gave him enough reason.

STYRON

All right. Listen to me, will you, please?

SECOND QUESTIONER

That gave him enough reason, right there.

STYRON

All right.

SECOND QUESTIONER

You didn't have to create anything for him. He saw brothers and sisters being killed all around him. He saw families being broken up.

STYRON

The evidence . . .

SECOND QUESTIONER

I notice your other point, that these were kind slavemasters. It doesn't matter how kind they were; they were slave-masters.

STYRON

I'm sorry, you haven't read it carefully. The evidence doesn't show any . . .

SECOND QUESTIONER

I've read it quite carefully.

STYRON

Well, then, we're at an impasse, my friend, because you say it's one way, and I say it's another.

SECOND QUESTIONER

Yes, but everytime we meet, you always jibe, and say that I miss your point. You ought to stop lying.

WOODWARD

Are there other people who want to ask questions?

THIRD QUESTIONER

I have a question about another Southern novel, an older one. Perhaps I have read you, the panel, wrong, but I gather you would be willing to predict that in a hundred years *Gone with the Wind* will be an obscure or forgotten novel. From listening to what you have said about using historical facts and about catching the essence, I gather that you would think that *Gone With the Wind* has failed.

STYRON

You must be crazy; I didn't say any such thing. I admire *Gone With the Wind* very, very much. I reread it about four years ago. It's a remarkable novel. I don't think it's a great novel, but it's a remarkable novel, precisely because this little woman from Atlanta had a fire of an imagination, which captured her and somehow allowed her to breathe some kind of miraculous spirit through and around the rather threadbare facts about antebellum Georgia. I certainly would not say that it's going to be dead in a hundred years. If I led you to believe that, you misunderstood me.

WOODWARD

Yes sir?

FOURTH QUESTIONER

As long as we call ourselves black and white, then even if we gain black power, unless we censor that movie I'm sure all white folks will go to it. They love that myth. But I think it's slightly beside the point. [to Styron] I would suggest, by the way, that I'm very sorry that Mr. Ellison didn't read your book. I'm extremely sorry, because of the putdown that you did on the young man. I think that intellectually you would have had a little bit more trouble with Mr. Ellison. I didn't stand up here for a putdown, so I'm not going to ask you anything at all. I have a whole lot of trouble with that book. I must say that, like every other black man, I resented it. I do think that the book must not be valid if all the black intellectuals put it down. If it salves the conscience (salves; how do you spell that word?) — if it salves the conscience of whites, and they want to read it, well, then you can make some money. But in view of this, I want to ask Mr. Warren this: since we all felt that *All the King's Men* had to do with Huey Long, why didn't *he* say Huey Long, or King Fish, or something like that? I wonder what would have happened to *The Confessions of Nat Turner* had it just been called the *Confessions of a Revolt Leader*, or something like that. I doubt if anybody would even have paid any attention to it. So I'd like to ask Mr. Ellison—he disguises his characters—

ELLISON

I made them up; they were all me.

FOURTH QUESTIONER

Yes, I know, but you've lived through [the period] since Rinehart, you've lived through Malcolm—

ELLISON

Yes.

FOURTH QUESTIONER

We've had some different experiences [since then.] I don't suggest that you follow in the footsteps of Leroi [Jones] really, as a lot of my militant friends would suggest, but since you are older, and you did live through something, I'd like to know—I mean, it was different, you know; everybody was trying to get along with whitey during that time, and now it's kind of six one way, half-a-dozen the other. But since you've lived through Malcolm, and I've heard that you are writing now, how do you

see guys like Rinehart? Would you fictionalize Malcolm, disguise him, or would you feel free to say, well . . .'

ELLISON

I would be ashamed to tell the truth about Malcolm in fiction.

FOURTH QUESTIONER

Ashamed to tell the truth about him?

ELLISON

Yes. Well, I think you're getting at a much more important problem which . . .

FOURTH QUESTIONER

You see, I'm concerned with *using* work . . . , Malcolm versus fiction for instance. I'm saying, leave off the word Nat Turner on that book, and just make it the *Confessions of a Slave Leader*, and nobody would read it. (Which I don't think they should, anyway.) But what would you do with Malcolm?

ELLISON

Well, wait a minute. You throw too many things at me at once, when you're really bouncing them off me to hit Bill.

FOURTH QUESTIONER

Yes, I'm trying very hard.

ELLISON

All right . . .

FOURTH QUESTIONER

He [Styron] put down that other young man so skillfully. I think I'd be a little bit more trouble because I don't think that that young man was aware of the fact that Mr. Styron was trying to put him down.

ELLISON

Maybe the young man . . .

FOURTH QUESTIONER

I thought that was cute and extremely unfair. Nine million people in this country voted for Wallace—I take that rather

seriously. A fascist. I mean, you see, we haven't accomplished the revolution—

ELLISON

May I . . .

FOURTH QUESTIONER

Yes, please.

ELLISON

I think that there is a basic question of what all arts attempt to do, or what art should attempt to do. Through depicting the real, fictionally, imaginatively, by abstracting from the historical process, reducing it to a controlled situation where the imagination can load each character, each scene, each mood, even each punctuation mark with the individual writer's sense of life, art can give man some transcendent sense of his complexity and his potentiality—of his possibilities—and convey something of the wonder of human life, and I must say, without reducing man to what Malraux would call a handful of secrets . . .

FOURTH QUESTIONER

That's why I'm sorry you didn't read the book.

ELLISON

. . . posited in his negative potentialities. I think that there is something else here which *you* might think about. I don't know whether you are a writer, or whether you should write, intend to write, or what not. But I think that there is a world of art, a world of fiction, and this must be protected against assaults. Not because we are black or white, or because we are oppressed and fighting for more freedom in this country, but because we seek to express ourselves. I want to say, I want the freedom to depict, to recreate Robert E. Lee in terms of my own vision of human possibility, human failure, and so on. So we cannot reduce this thing, really, to the struggle, which is very important on the political level. This distinction is very important, and I point out that two of the ten critics tried to stick to the literary, to the artistic problems involved. Beyond this, of course, as you and the other young man have dramatized so vividly for us, there *is* a problem. Damn it, there is a *problem* about recreating historical figures. That's why I said it's poison to the novelist; he shouldn't bother them. Don't appropriate the names. Don't move into the historian's arena, because you can only be slaughtered there. But you can also be very, very power-

ful, and I think that this should not be missed: this book, whatever its literary qualities—and I will stand up for Bill's personal qualities and his . . .

FOURTH QUESTIONER

Malcolm said that most whites in America, deep down in their toes, are racists, even when they don't think so.

ELLISON

I would suspect that all Americans, black and white, are racists.

FOURTH QUESTIONER

Well, we . . .

ELLISON

That isn't the problem here, you see. You asked me then what would I make of Malcolm. Well I wouldn't dare to tell the truth about him, because it would destroy the same myth, and this myth is a valuable myth. But I don't want Malcolm telling me what American history is, and I don't want him to tell me what my experience has been, and so on, any more than I want or I would allow Bill or anybody else to do that. You see, there is a world of fiction, and there's a world of politics. I think it's very important for your own position that you keep these things in clear perspective.

FOURTH QUESTIONER

Are you suggesting that we are still invisible?

ELLISON

I am by no means. I was not invisible, and I would think that you, speaking with your inclination, would remember that old joke: The Negro is unseen because of his high visibility.

WOODWARD

Well, I hope that enigma will satisfy questions. There are people here who have been standing patiently for over two hours, and I feel that I am obliged to bring the meeting to a close after one more question.

FIFTH QUESTIONER

I was going to ask two questions, but I'll condense them. Mr. Styron has stressed several times what I think is probably the quintessential bone of contention this evening; he said—I

think I quote him accurately—that the fiction writer's obligation is to make sense out of history. I was going to ask, whether he thinks that is the fiction writer's primary, or one of his primary, obligations. I'd like to address my central question to Mr. Ellison, and step back to a novel that is not as recent and, at present I assume, not as controversial as *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. Mr. Ellison, you said that Jim of *Huckleberry Finn* was not grounded enough, and I think many of us would probably agree with that, but I'd like to ask whether you feel that this was because of a failure of creative imagination, or a failure of historical imagination, on the novelist's part. Or do you see the two as one problem?

ELLISON

I think the author was too much a victim of the history of his times. Artistically, you see, fiction isn't written out of history, it's written out of other art forms. The going art form for depicting Negroes, the one freshest on the minds of people during Mark Twain's time, was the popular art form of the blackfaced minstrel, and it was that tradition which Mark Twain was very much involved in. His own values managed to project through Jim, but I still insist that it was not grounded enough in the reality of Negro American personality. I know of no black—Negro—critics (I'm a Negro, by the way) who wrote criticisms of *Huckleberry Finn* when it appeared. It was all a dialogue between, a recreation, a collaboration, between a white American novelist of good heart, of democratic vision, one dedicated to values—I know much of Mark Twain's writing—and white readers, primarily. What is going on now is that now you have more literate Negroes, and they are questioning themselves, and questioning everything which has occurred and been written in the country.

FIFTH QUESTIONER

Well, then, in a sense his creative imagination was limited in fact by the historical moment, and that is what has changed.

ELLISON

Limited, too, by his being not quite as literary a man as he was required to be. Because he could have gone to Walter Scott, to the Russians, to any number of places, and found touchstones for filling out the complex humanity of that man who appeared in his book out of his own imagination, and who was known as Jim.

FIFTH QUESTIONER

But were any of the, let's say, less socially favored characters of novelists who were his contemporaries or his predecessors any more fully recreated historically than he managed to do with Jim? You know, with someone with whom he could not directly identify?

ELLISON

Aren't you making this too much of an objective matter? It's a collaboration. It was a successful book. I read it years ago. In fact, it was so successful and so painful that they made it a boy's book, a children's book, in order to be able to deal with the moral pain which it aroused. Nevertheless, part of the discomfort which we feel—and the questions which those slaves (when was this? the 80's), those people of my background, would have asked about it—was not Mark Twain's central concern. What I am suggesting is that *everybody* reads now. *Everybody* is American whether they call themselves separatists, black separatists, secessionists or what not. And everybody is saying: Damn it, tell it like *I* think it is. And this is a real problem for the novelist.

WOODWARD

Ladies and gentlemen, we are limited to two hours and we have exceeded our limit. Let me thank you for your patience and good humor, and our fellow members for their contribution.

For permission to record and transcribe the foregoing we are indebted to Professor C. Vann Woodward, the moderator; the three panelists; and to Professor Bennett H. Wall, executive secretary of the Southern Historical Association.